

HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

SOCIAL CARE INQUIRY

SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION (SWC)

Summary of initial findings report – August 2020

Introduction

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) has gathered first-hand evidence and information regarding women's experiences of the Social Care sector. Digital roundtables, online surveys, email submissions and phone interviews were conducted in order to gather a range of information.

The evidence provided here is a snapshot of some of those key issues. The SWC plans to take forward the large volume of data gathered to ensure women's voices are heard. We would like to extend our thanks to all women who took part, particularly those who shared hard hitting stories and experiences with us.

Prior to the lockdown, Social Care has long been seen as one of the most undervalued services. Investment and underfunding of staff have led to many challenges which the current situation has illustrated.

The Social Care sector covers a wide range in Scotland. This can be detrimental as there is a lack of perception about how wide the sector truly is and the full role it covers. As lockdown restrictions ease, a number of issues will continue to remain. Quality of Social Care in all its forms impacts disproportionately on women at both a national and local level. This has a knock-on effect on the unpaid care work that women do.

Some of the main issues which have been highlighted by the pandemic include:

- Investment in Social Care by successive governments.
- Recognition around the work undertaken by employees.
- Rising demand.
- Local Authority cuts.
- Long term issues regarding the impact of COVID-19 and what this will mean for the sector.
- Workers feeling they have been "*left behind*" during the pandemic.

Social Care Issues Pre-Lockdown

For the majority of women consulted, the current pandemic has thrown into sharp focus what have been growing challenges in Social Care for a number of years, e.g., a lack of long-term investment.

Issues include:

- Many women noted that support could only be accessed after fighting for it over many months when it should have been available at the very start. There are worries that if this is the case, the most vulnerable could be left *“suffering in silence”*.
- There is a lack of a joined-up approach, especially where many different services are used for one person on a daily basis.
- Public services have seen a reliance on not-for-profit organisations. There is a risk that vital services could be pushed into the third sector.

Privatisation of Social Care

Privatisation of much of the sector over the past few decades is an underlying cause of many issues. Companies are making large profits at the detriment of their own staff and public money.

Discussions included:

- Private care homes can be seen as *“exploitative”* and *“extortionate”*. This is a particular problem given that pay and conditions for many staff within these companies is often much less than the living wage.
- There were, however, seen to be some benefits of private Social Care. A small proportion of workers reported their terms and conditions were favourable and they had greater flexibility in how they did their jobs and administered care

“Any sort of service like Social Care where you run it for a profit, there will ultimately be people who pay for that in terms of their own rights.”

Employment within the Social Care Sector

The vast majority of women who work within Social Care find the job worthwhile but often do not feel valued by their employers or society. There can be little recognition of the unique challenges that workers face. Many enjoy working in a job that is about caring for vulnerable people. Staff view their role in making a difference to service users lives as extremely important.

Issues include:

- The mental health aspect of what the current pandemic has had on Social Care staff who have been dealing with the COVID-19 crisis on the frontline.
- Wages are seen as unfair for the amount of valuable work that needs to be done.
- Continuous under staffing and budgetary cuts lead to staff working excessive hours. Some women noted they were forced to opt out of Working Time Directive laws of 48 hours a week by signing a waiver.
- Cuts are constantly made due to stretched Local Authority budgets. More paperwork and policies are often added with no additional funding or recognition of the pressure this can place on staff.
- The time allocated to carrying out tasks leaves many workers with tight schedules and feeling they cannot give the appropriate amount of care to clients.

“Losing service users is the hardest part. This comes with the job, but I get attached and it affects me when we lose someone we’ve cared for over the years.”

“Even a small pay rise would be some sort of recognition for the past few months.”

“The levels of bureaucracy mean that the sector is more about ‘number crunching’ than the human aspects of caring.”

“I love my job and I feel I get a fair wage based on the commissioning rate from the local Council. I feel valued by my colleagues and the people we look after, but I feel undervalued by society as a whole.”

Issues during COVID-19

The lack of focus on the Social Care sector at the beginning of the pandemic contributed to many workers feeling “invisible” and “let down”. Many staff were terrified to go into work, seeing it as a frightening environment. There were “constant worries day and night” about being potential carriers in and out of service user’s spaces. This had a knock-on effect of worrying about COVID-19 and transmitting it to their own families and fellow colleagues.

Some of the main issues included:

- The mental toll on workers that came with the increase in deaths has left many feeling helpless. This was extremely hard to take, particularly as the level of care being provided was so intense at a time when family members could not be with relatives.

- Many clients with complex care needs were often unaware or frightened of what was going on. This led to much extra worry for staff and contributed to feeling the sector was difficult to work in.
- Self-isolation was a real worry for many workers. Statutory Sick Pay or holidays often had to be taken when this was the case. Employers and Government should have been more proactive in taking a sectoral approach to how policies were laid out in terms of Social Care workers.
- Not being equipped with the correct protective uniform whilst trying to continue to look after vulnerable people was seen as a huge responsibility. Many women voiced fears that they were passing infections between clients as a result of this.
- The guidance provided could be unclear and impractical. Many places, particularly care homes, felt information provided continued to change quickly, making it harder to implement. This was exacerbated in places where social distancing and other measures could not be practically enforced.
- There was a lack of help or acknowledgement as to what staff on the ground were going through. Many of these workers also have health issues but continued to work every day to focus on their service users at a risk to their own lives.

“We had to just carry on as normal and try to get through it.”

“I had the added stress of continuing to work whilst the safety guidelines seemed to change daily.”

“They knew this was coming. It had already hit Spain and Italy. Why was that not seen?”

“Care homes were an after-thought, but this has always been the case. All this virus has done is to show how undervalued carers are.”

Experiences of Clients During Lockdown

Understandably, service users' experiences changed drastically during lockdown with family members having to “*shore up gaps*”. For many consulted, this resulted in them feeling that their own individualised care was not accurately assessed and was simply taken away with little notice. There are hopes that with the easing of lockdown there will be more support.

Issues included:

- Early discharge from hospital at the start of the pandemic to free up NHS beds saw many individuals being placed back into their own homes which were not properly equipped for their needs.
- Many women who had their support taken away relied on community-based volunteers for day to day tasks. Charities and initiatives hand delivering food and essentials was “a godsend”.
- Many service users felt that having care taken away led to a deterioration in their mental health and an increase in physical injuries such as falls.
- A number of women noted they were given little information about who to contact for support regarding next steps, particularly where shielding.
- Social Care workers are extremely valued by those using services, especially where a strong relationship has built up. This was one of the hardest parts of lockdown.
- The high use of agency staff meant that there could be differing interactions for service users on a day to day basis rather than having one dedicated carer.
- Those needing care were wary of asking for help, particularly during the height of the pandemic, as they did not want to be seen as a burden.

“Social Carers need the time to do their job properly and to be recognized for what they do They are very low paid, and the working terms and conditions should be vastly improved.”

“Nobody checked up on us to see how we were, this put a huge strain on family relationships within the household.”

“I am absolutely drained from working throughout lockdown, home schooling my kids and having to provide care to both my own mother and my partner’s mother. My mental health would have snapped if it was not for those relying on me.”

Post-Lockdown

Going forward, a radical rethinking of the Social Care sector is crucial to provide high quality care that accounts for everyone’s needs. Investment and proper valuation of work should illustrate the positive impacts in the long term of the sector. The savings that could come from unpaid carers not having to give up work or the positive health impacts that could be felt in a properly resourced sector were all discussed.

Recommendations included:

- A need to look at the sector concurrently with healthcare to ensure that if something goes wrong, provisions are still in place for care. This is a particular worry for those who fear a second wave of COVID-19.
- Providing more high-quality care that allows people to stay at home rather than costly care homes.
- Impact assessments regarding the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the care sector, including workers, are urgently needed.
- To show Social Care as a career path for young people by greater investment within the sector e.g. high-quality training.
- Development of more in-depth training for staff so they can continuously progress. This could include formal managerial programmes for all those who wish to advance.
- Supporting staff to have access to regular mental health checks and counselling.
- Specialist training for employees in a particular field. For instance, relevant dementia care training for those working with patients in this area.
- Reprioritising of the time spent with service users. Investment in the sector should include an overhaul of the short time periods workers can spend with individuals and provide a high standard of care.
- An increase in community resources and consultation with those on the front line.
- More interaction and training regarding national and local policies with staff that actively work with service users.

“Social Care needs to be brought back in house by the NHS and Local Authorities. Integration of Health and Social Care will never be truly effective whilst care is outsourced.”

“All this should be looked upon to ensure those accessing care do not feel they are a burden.”

“Short term solutions such as simply throwing a cash boost because the focus is on it now does not solve the long-term problem within Social Care regarding quality, investment and staffing.”

The Best Experiences of Working in Social Care

“Making a difference to someone’s life. Seeing the delight on their faces when you make them feel better or special or when you go above and beyond what is expected”

“Putting a smile on your service users faces and seeing how appreciative they are for what you do for them.”

“Assisting individuals, families and the overall community. It is a privilege to be trusted to look after the most vulnerable and to encourage them to develop their potential.”

“The difference you make to the people you support. The love and connection you have with them. Being able to support them to live the best life they can and getting a smile and a laugh is just wonderful.”

“The small achievements for service users is the most rewarding and having a good day with them is best.”

Thank You

The SWC would like to extend our unreserved thanks to all women who contributed their time and stories to our work on Social Care. As an organisation, we will continue to push policy and decision makers to make changes which have a positive impact on Social Care users, workers and providers. The information contained in this report will be forwarded to local and national decision makers for their consideration.

Website - www.scottishwomensconvention.org

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